

CONGRESS OF PRO-EUROPEAN FORCES AND ITS POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE OPPOSITION

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Summary

On May 19, Alaksandar Milinkievic, the leader of *For Freedom* movement, proposed to hold a Congress of Pro-European Forces. The event may have both positive and negative implications for the opposition.

Formal Split-up

Opposition members and voters taking interest in politics have had a clear understanding for some time now that *de facto* there were two opposing groups in the opposition. The first one is represented by politicians and organizations that support the idea of Belarus's long-term integration into the EU. The most prominent political figure of this group has been Alaksandar Milinkievic, who was the single opposition candidate in the 2006 presidential election. He began to stand out in the crowd even more noticeably in the fall of 2008, when he became the only prominent opposition figure who favored lifting the visa ban imposed by the EU on a number of high-ranking Belarusian office holders, including Lukashenka. Alaksandar Milinkievic was the most consistent and active supporter of the Eastern Partnership, another EU initiative, aimed at strengthening Belarusian independence.

The second group can be called pro-Russian. Of the official opposition organizations, only the Belarusian Party of Communists formally belongs to it. A number of other opposition figures in one way or another supported pro-Russian statements of the BPC Chairperson Siarhiej Kaliakin. In August 2008, he declared that Belarus was obliged to back up Russia by recognizing the sovereignty of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In September 2008, Kaliakin said Russia had the right to annex the Crimea, as it was 'Russian land'. In February 2009 he aired his discontent with Lukashenka signing the Joint Regional Air Defence treaty which was not beneficial enough to Russia.

From the second half of 2008 onwards, some major changes have been taking place in international and domestic politics, the Belarus – EU dialog being intensified and the EaP coming into the foreground. Kaliakin kept making scandalous declarations. Yet, opposition figures went on saying that nothing out of the ordinary was going on, which made them look even more ridiculous in the eyes of the general public in Belarus. Heads of the UCPB, the BPF Party and other formal party leaders said there was no split-up into pro-European and pro-Russian groups in the opposition, but there were the United Democratic Forces (UDF). They insisted that all the transformations in Belarus were about making up the façade, while the dialog between the Belarusian regime and the West excluding the opposition meant offering a helping hand to save the regime, as European investment strengthened Lukashenka's power.

Alaksandar Milinkievic's initiative formalizes the split-up. Yet another fight between the opposition groups is already underway. Lavon Barsceuski, the Chairperson of the BPF party, has aired the idea of excluding everyone co-operating with *For Freedom* movement from the party.

What Comes Next?

Today Alaksandar Milinkievic's initiative strongly resembles Napoleon's phrase about first getting into a fight and then seeing what will come out of it. Yet, whatever Napoleon might have said, he acted quite differently, first thinking over his steps thoroughly. Time will show if Milinkievic has a feasible action plan. Calling up a Congress of Pro-European Forces is meaningful if it results in the creation of a Coalition of Pro-European Forces. Such attempts have already been made. One of them led to the European Coalition (EC) brand being set up. However, it is difficult to remember what EC representatives said, apart from repeating that Lukashenka was bad and the EU was good. As a result, there is the EC as a formal body, but there are no people or content in it. It is just another phantom, which are quite many in the opposition ranks.

The creation of a Coalition of Pro-European Forces will have positive implications for the democratic movement in Belarus and its prospects. At least the heads of regional democratic organizations will know why they get together and discuss things. Four-hour meetings of the UDF Political Council, accompanied by a downpour of negative emotions with a zero result will become history.

However, that will be the case provided the coalition is really established. It is not nearly enough to bring together activists in Minsk and declare that a coalition (or a forum or an association – whatever) of pro-European forces exists. Without some definite steps to create such an association, without determining its goals and objectives, without an action plan it will be just another form deprived of any meaning. It will become just another phantom, which will make the opposition structure even more complicated; though it is already too complex to be grasped not only by voters but even Belarusian experts and analysts, to say nothing of foreign ones.

It has to be hoped that pro-European supporters will have enough political will and skills to come to an agreement and act together. A lot will depend on whether pro-European opposition VIPs will be able to put aside their personal ambitions and agree on their roles in the coalition. In order to become one day number one, someone will have to take on subsidiary roles and prove their ability to be a team player, since that is what the common cause requires.

Since Belarusian politics is personified, it will be a serious trial for the coalition to choose its leader. If the leader is not determined, it will be an important signal that we are witnessing the second edition of the UDF. There is very little time left before the 2011 presidential election and Lukashenka's opponents are having major time trouble.